

## What Happened When Grandma Danced

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Jesus is a foreigner in Thailand. The forms most Thai Christians use to express their worship of him are primarily western imports. The average Thai person, viewing what they see in churches throughout their country, would say that Christianity is the foreigner's religion. It is seen as the westerner's way (of gaining merit) and because of a strong sense of Thai national identity with another religion most Thai people reject Christianity for themselves. Jesus remains an outsider to them.

But what would happen if Jesus came as a Thai? What would he look like? How would he talk? What would he eat? What music would he enjoy? What would happen if John 1:14 became a reality for Thailand today?

The northeast sector of Thailand is home to approximately 20 million people known as Isaan. With a strong Lao heritage the majority of these people carry cultural traditions that distinguish them from the Central Thai. Their language (Lao/Isaan) is different. They eat glutinous rice with their fingers as their staple diet. They have a unique musical heritage that goes back for hundreds of years and remains popular today. This was the region where the Evangelical Covenant Church of America sent Jim and Joan Gustafson as missionaries in 1971.

Through a process of learning, solely based upon the grace of God, the Covenant work began to bring Jesus to where people lived in a way that people could encounter him as one of themselves. The work began with the Word - and the Word had to be reborn as a northeastern Thai.

Something as simple as using the local language in worship made an immediate impact. "Jesus talks our village talk!" This exclamation heard by believers in Isaan seems simple yet is still considered radical. To outsiders it is an open invitation. Unfortunately, even today, thirty years after our work began, most westernized Thai churches throughout the **Lao-speaking** region of northeast Thailand still use the **central Thai** language in their worship.

It was during one of these local-language Bible discussions, as people sat on the straw mats in the home of a believer, that one elderly woman stood up from her squatting position, stepped into the middle of the circle and suddenly began to dance the traditional Isaan steps. Her thin arms and fingers waved gracefully back and forth in rhythm to her small delicate steps. It was a familiar sight at drunken parties - but this was *Christian worship!* There was no music, only a stunned silence.

Finally one voice called out, "Grandma, sit **down!** What do you think you're doing?"

Without a break in her motions she simply stated, "You don't tell your old grandma to sit down. I'm 90 years old and I'm just thanking the Lord that you're here."

What happened after Grandma danced changed everything. Dance became a part of worship. And music soon followed.

Isaan culture has a variety of beautiful and melodious indigenous musical instruments but none express the heart of Isaan people more than the bamboo panpipes known locally as the "kaen". The incorporation of the kaen into worship did not come without questions, however. In animistic practices the kaen is used to call upon the spirits. Was it appropriate to use the kaen in the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ?

This question is still debated by many Thai Christians. Some cannot separate the idolatrous practice from the instrument used and therefore condemn the kaen as "satanic". However, for the local Isaan man or woman, unspoiled by western religious trappings, the kaen remains the sound of "our people". It speaks deeply to the heart values of those Isaan who are now in a new family as God's children. God accepts them as they are. As one follower says, "Why can't we use the kaen to praise God? We used the same mouth to follow spirits before. Does this mean we need to get a new mouth to praise God now?" Isn't a new heart enough already?

Over time a whole hymnody of Isaan music has been produced and continues to be written by gifted men and women changed by the grace of God. The church has truly become an indigenous Thai Isaan church that rejoices in using the best forms from their culture to celebrate new life in Christ. One recent song, translated below, expresses the fact that Jesus is no longer a stranger to Isaan people. And, of course, this is one of those songs to which Isaan Christians get up and dance!

Join in Praise

From the Heavenly City the Word came down.  
He was born right here where we live.  
We Isaan people have new happiness now.  
He loves us and that will not change!

From the City Above, he came down for us.  
Full of love from the Almighty.  
Now listen! The sound of the ching and the kaen,  
And who is that playing the pin?  
Hear the clear tones of the ponglong as they join  
The sounds of the saw, "Eeee oon aaaw."  
The melody of the saw is coupled with the sound of voices of praise.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Victor over death,  
Is born in our cultural forms.  
Listen to the sounds of the flute and the drum  
All Isaan rejoices in Him!

Written by Paul DeNeui, 4/4/01